

Meeting:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:	10 October 2006
Subject:	Scrutiny discussion forum
Key Decision: <i>(Executive-side only)</i>	Not applicable
Responsible Officer:	Paul Najsarek, Director People, Performance and Policy
Portfolio Holder:	Cllr David Ashton, Business Development
Status:	Part I
Encs:	Appendix A: Draft acceptable use policy

SECTION 1 – SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report sets out proposals for an online discussion forum for scrutiny members.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Committee

- 1) Agree to the establishment of a scrutiny discussion forum.
- 2) Agree to structure the forum around the headings of scrutiny processes, scrutiny projects and scrutiny committees.
- 3) Consider, comment on and agree the attached draft acceptable use policy for the scrutiny online forum.
- 4) Agree that the forum be piloted for a period of three months and that an interim report be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on progress at that stage.
- 5) Agree that users of the forum be set up with login details and passwords.

Subject to agreement of (1) above, that the Committee recommend to Council

- 6) That the decision of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to establish an

- online forum for the development of scrutiny activity in Harrow be noted.
- 7) That access to the scrutiny online discussion forum be restricted to non-executive members and officers within the scrutiny team.

SECTION 2 - REPORT

Background

This committee has already given significant consideration to the way in which it communicates messages about its work both within the council to the community. Currently this includes

- Regularly updated pages on the council's internet site www.harrow.gov.uk/scrutiny
- Information on the council's intranet pages
- A quarterly newsletter for members
- Dedicated email address scrutiny@harrow.gov.uk

At the Scrutiny Members evening held in July members suggested that a scrutiny discussion forum would help members to share ideas. A discussion forum is a web-based service that allows people to post questions, exchange ideas and share information. It is not the same as a blog (or weblog), which is an online diary, usually updated by one person. Examples of national discussion forums include the Centre for Public Scrutiny¹ and the Improvement and Development Agency.²

It is intended that Harrow's scrutiny forum be based on the council's intranet site. The technology is more or less ready to use but there are a number of issues to consider relating to how the forum should operate which are outlined in this report.

Resource implications

The cost of establishing the discussion forum for scrutiny will be in the region of £1000, which will be met from within the existing budget provision for scrutiny.

Options recommended

A small consultation exercise was undertaken with scrutiny members. Members are now invited to consider the issues outlined below.

1. Access to the forum

There has been a mixed response to the question around whom should have access to the forum and whether this should include non-executive members who are not part of scrutiny or executive members. It is proposed that access be restricted to all non-executive members (whether members of scrutiny or not) on the basis that they may wish to debate issues either relating to the holding to account of the executive or alternatively pertaining to the process of carrying out of scrutiny. In addition it is recommended that members of the scrutiny team also have access. These arrangements could be reviewed at a later stage.

¹ <http://www.cfps.org.uk/talk/>

² <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/forum/discussions.do>

2. Acceptable use of the forum

The forum will be based on the intranet site. As a closed forum is proposed (access would be restricted to those whom it is agreed should have access) it is likely that the forum will not need to be moderated. However, in order to ensure propriety, there will need to be some form of acceptable use policy. A policy has been developed corporately for staff and a slightly amended version is attached for Members' consideration. Members using the forum will of course have regard to other existing guidance such as the Code of Conduct for Councillors (Part 5A of the Council's constitution). Members are requested to consider the appropriateness of the attached draft policy.

3. Structure of the forum

It is recommended that the forum be structured initially around the following headings:

- Scrutiny processes – for example issues relating to methodology, scoping
- Scrutiny projects – for example specific reviews or projects
- Scrutiny committees – for example agenda setting, developing questions for Q&A sessions

4. Registering with the forum

To access the forum members will need to have remote access to the council's intranet site. In addition, members will need to register with the forum.

The first option is to request members to go to the discussion forum page and then to create login details. The drawback with this option is that there is likely to be a short delay with this option because the member will need to be given specific access rights. The second option is for members to be set up with a login and given a password. This option is potentially less secure, although Members will be able to alter the password subsequently. However, it would mean that members could access the forum and start to contribute threads immediately; in any case this approach will be less problematic because the forum will be closed.

5. Piloting the forum

It is recommended that the forum be piloted initially for three months in order to evaluate whether it provides members with the means of discussion that they were looking for. It is recommended that a report be submitted to the January meeting of the Committee for this purpose.

The final decision relating to the forum will need to be referred to full Council because of the proposal that access be restricted to non-executive Members.

SECTION 3 - STATUTORY OFFICER CLEARANCE

Chief Financial Officer	<input type="checkbox"/> Y
Monitoring Officer	<input type="checkbox"/> Y

SECTION 4 - CONTACT DETAILS AND BACKGROUND PAPERS

Contact:

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Background Papers:

- Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 30 January 2006, presentation on Scrutiny Communications
- Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 10 October 2005, Communications Strategy for Scrutiny
- Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 10 October 2005, Principles of scrutiny

IF APPROPRIATE, does the report include the following considerations?

1.	Consultation	YES
2.	Corporate Priorities	Tackling waste and giving real value for money
3.	Manifesto Pledge Reference Number	D

Appendix A – Online Intranet Discussion Forum – Draft Acceptable Use Policy for Scrutiny Online Froum

1. Introduction

This Acceptable Use Policy is intended to help create an atmosphere in which freedom of speech is balanced by self-discipline and a mature attitude to discussion. Members are encouraged to join these discussions and it would therefore be very surprising if exchanges did not occasionally become a little heated!

By virtue of your participation in a discussion, you are deemed to have agreed to abide by the rules. Although the Council cannot take responsibility for monitoring every message that is posted to the Intranet, it must reserve the right to remove inappropriate messages and prohibit use by anyone who repeatedly ignores these rules. Misuse of forums may constitute misconduct and will be dealt with by the Council's disciplinary procedures.

2. Forum creation

Requests for new forums must be made to the Web Editor, Communications Section. Forums will not generally be moderated but the requestor will be deemed to be the owner and will be responsible for informing the HITS system administrators (via HITS HelpDesk) of any inappropriate contributions that require to be deleted. For restricted forums, the owner will also be responsible for identifying who is to be given access to the forum.

3. Personal identification

Some forums may be read by all Intranet users; however in order to make contributions to a forum, users will need to register using their network username and Harrow email address. Do not represent yourself as another person. Anonymous contributions will not be accepted.

4. Use of language and conduct of discussion.

Messages should not be malicious or designed to offend. In particular, the use of swear-words or undue profanity is prohibited.

Your message should be within the scope of the subject under discussion. If you make a contribution that is inappropriate to the subject under discussion, it may be removed or you may be directed by the owner not to raise the matter further or to raise it within a separate discussion group.

Reference should not be made to the personality of other participants in a discussion nor should attacks be made on an individual's character unless the person concerned has already chosen to bring his or her personality into the issue under discussion.

One to one arguments, disagreements and disputes of a personal nature must not be conducted through public discussion. The forum should not be used to discuss individual cases of Member conduct or allegations of misconduct by Members.

You should remember that you are legally responsible for what you write. You must not make statements that are libellous, obscene, seek to incite racial hatred or otherwise break the laws of the United Kingdom.

5. Private email

If a person has sent you a private email you may not reproduce it in a public discussion group without the prior consent of the person who sent it.

6. Advertising

No advertising is allowed except where it is for an event, publication or similar items that has direct relevance to the subject of discussion.

Information about locating and sharing knowledge and expertise is welcomed, but within the specific discussion category provided.

7. Complaints about a breach of these rules

Complaints about a breach of these rules should be made by private email to the Web Editor who will take timely and appropriate action with regard to the complaint.

Please note:

By virtue of your participation in an online discussion forum on the Intranet, you are deemed to have agreed to abide by these rules.